

# Studying abroad inclusively: Reflections by college students with and without intellectual disability

**Seb M Prohn**

Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

**Kelly R Kelley**

Western Carolina University, USA

**David L Westling**

Western Carolina University, USA

Date accepted: 19 October 2015

Journal of Intellectual Disabilities

2016, Vol. 20(4) 341–353

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/17446295155617050

jid.sagepub.com



## Abstract

Postsecondary education programs have increased opportunities for students with and without intellectual disabilities to study abroad as inclusive classes. Using open-coding qualitative techniques, the authors examined an inclusive study abroad group's daily reflective journals during a study abroad trip to London and Dublin. Three shared categories emerged from analysis: personal development, bonding/social inclusion, and learning from English and Irish adults with intellectual disabilities. Each group reported two distinct categories as well. Students with intellectual disabilities described the importance of mobility/transportation and fun, while their classmates without intellectual disabilities described the importance of inclusive learning and an increasing awareness of barriers to full participation for people with disabilities. Student-constructed categories are used to describe the benefits of inclusive study abroad and build future inclusive international opportunities.

## Keywords

inclusion, intellectual disability, study abroad

---

## Corresponding author:

Seb M Prohn, Center on Transition Innovations, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1314 West Main St, P.O. Box 842011, Richmond, VA 23284, USA.

Email: smprohn@vcu.edu

Prior to the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA), students with intellectual disabilities had limited access to higher education. In contrast, Think College (2015) has recently identified at least 242 programs facilitating higher education access for students with intellectual disabilities. College, as a mechanism of transition from high school to adulthood, is an increasingly viable option for all students.

In many postsecondary education (PSE) programs for students with intellectual disabilities, inclusion is paramount. Students with intellectual disabilities participate in university classes, utilize university facilities and resources, and live in university housing. Studying abroad, however, remains an aspect of the college experience available mostly for students without disabilities (Institute of International Education, 2014). Nevertheless, based on PSE program experiences in which students with intellectual disabilities show they can function successfully in the college community, participating in study abroad opportunities seems more and more like a viable opportunity for students with intellectual disabilities, especially if provided with appropriate natural supports. As we reported elsewhere, such was the case with a number of students with intellectual disabilities enrolled in a PSE program who participated in an inclusive study abroad trip to London and Dublin (Kelley et al., 2016).

PSE programs have developed various strategies to address student educational and vocational needs, but travel skills still pose formidable barriers for individuals with intellectual disabilities (Davies et al., 2010; Groce, 1996; McConkey and McCullough, 2006). As a result, students with intellectual disabilities are likely underrepresented in university study abroad programs. However, in our experience, a PSE program can create inclusive and supportive study abroad experiences that simultaneously benefit students with and without intellectual disabilities (Kelley et al., 2016).

### ***Benefits and barriers to independent travel for students with intellectual disabilities***

People with all abilities travel the globe, and the opportunity to travel in groups and without family members has resulted in positive outcomes for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Kishore and Nagar (2008) reported on outcomes from outdoor expeditions taken by youth with intellectual disabilities where they observed reduced behavioral challenges. Parents, who did not join on the expeditions, assessed capabilities of their children as stronger after the journey. Similarly, parents whose adult children with intellectual disabilities went on group holidays without family members reported that upon return, children had greater confidence, decision-making skills, and communication skills (McConkey and McCullough, 2006). Individuals with intellectual disabilities express interest in the opportunity to travel. Using semi-projective data collection techniques, Dykens et al. (2006) found adults with intellectual disabilities had various wishes that were often difficult to achieve: experiencing academic success, building and maintaining friendships, and traveling away from home. One sentence completion exercise showed interests in travel were more common for adults over the age of 20.

Nevertheless, there are barriers to travel for students with intellectual disabilities. Davies et al. (2010) cited a series of adaptive challenges that created travel barriers for people with intellectual disabilities, including reading maps, paying for transport services, time management, literacy, and problem solving. McConkey and McCullough (2006) identified travel costs, underdeveloped social skills, and negative attitudes in destination communities as additional barriers to independent travel. For students with limited financial literacy, unfamiliar currencies were feared to compound money management challenges. Novel forms of transportation, such as a subway, train,

and plane travel were also viewed as potential barriers to successful participation in university-guided study abroad opportunities.

### ***Study abroad experiences for students with disabilities***

Study abroad programs have become quite popular among college students. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2014), in 2012–2013, more than 289,000 US college students studied abroad. Included in this number were almost 3200 students with disabilities coming from 265 different institutions. Of the students with disabilities, about 28% of them were identified as students with “mental disabilities” (IIE, 2014). Students with disabilities are already vastly underrepresented in study abroad programs, and students with intellectual disabilities represent an even smaller fraction of this already low number. This is likely the case because students with intellectual disabilities currently access fewer than 4% of the 4-year universities in the United States. That is, of the 2870 4-year institutions in the United States, only 111 offer postsecondary opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities (Snyder and Dillow, 2013; Think College, 2015).

In 1998, Hurst called for “greater efforts to ensure that students with disabilities can experience education which is truly inclusive” (p. 126). While greater efforts have arguably been made in institutions of higher education, this has not been the case with international travel for students with disabilities. Some students with disabilities have been included in study abroad courses, yet they have primarily been students with physical and learning disabilities (Hurst, 1998; Katz, 2007). Little consideration has been given to students with intellectual disabilities.

A variety of study abroad benefits have been reported for college students without intellectual disabilities. These include displaying stronger cross-culture adaptability (Mapp, 2012), increased perceptions of global citizenry (Tarrant et al., 2014), and higher levels of intercultural competence (Salisbury et al., 2013). Additionally, skills and attitudes associated with study abroad serve as a marketable asset for students searching for postgraduate opportunities whether in the workforce or in pursuit of another degree.

In contrast, little is known about how study abroad experiences impact students with intellectual disabilities or how traveling with students with intellectual disabilities in an inclusive course might affect college students without intellectual disabilities. Therefore, in this study, we analyze and interpret the daily reflections created by students with and without intellectual disabilities who participated in our inclusive study abroad trip. Such an analysis is important because through student feedback, evidence can be accumulated to develop and offer inclusive, international study courses that meet the needs college students with and without intellectual disabilities. The qualitative themes we identify in this article convey the aspects of the international opportunity that students deemed most salient.

## **Method**

In May 2014, three students with intellectual disabilities, six students without intellectual disabilities, and three instructors departed from their midsized public university located in the rural southeastern United States for a 9-day trip to London and Dublin. The course in which all students were enrolled facilitated a critical comparison across England, Ireland, and the United States of services and opportunities for adults with intellectual disabilities. Students used literature, organizational visits, and direct interactions with persons with intellectual disabilities and service

providers to compare services. Meetings with various entities also allowed students to share their inclusive PSE experiences with diverse audiences. Site seeing and tourism filled students' non-course related hours. (For further information about the trip, see Kelley et al., 2016).

All students reflected daily on their experiences abroad using flexible reflection media. Diary-style entries, Web logs (blogs), and video were all accepted formats. However, due to barriers related to filming and uploading videos, students chose script-based methods for journaling. A total of 70 journal entries were written by nine students over an 8-day period. Three students with disabilities completed 22 entries, and the remaining 48 entries were completed by students without disabilities.

### **Analysis**

After students had returned to the United States, fulfilled their final course requirements, and received grades, the instructors were granted exemption from their university institutional review board to examine student journals which were interpreted as confidential existing data. The 70 journal entries were compiled into two documents, one for students with intellectual disabilities and another for students without disabilities. Each document was interpreted separately using an open-coding process consistent with the initial stages of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). What separated the qualitative interpretation from the grounded theory was that no encompassing theory was constructed using student data.

The goal of coding was to summarize students' experiences and create a more parsimonious data set—one where several sentences used for describing a single incident were reduced to singular phrases: initial codes. Initial coding, therefore, focused on written incidents within journal text. Sometimes incidents were captured in a single line of text, but often they were distillations of multiple sentences. The goal was not to replace students' experiences but to interpret the essence of statements while assuring codes remained connected to raw data. Peer support journals yielded 233 initial codes. When common codes were combined, they formed 21 categories that were further synthesized and reduced in the axial coding (Strauss, 1987) stage to five major categories. The categories were as follows: (1) inclusive learning, (2) barrier awareness, (3) personal growth/development, (4) bonding/social inclusion, and (5) learning from experiences of English and Irish adults with intellectual disabilities.

The students with intellectual disabilities also made journal entries either through typing (with and without the assistance of their fellow students without intellectual disabilities) or through dictation (which was then typed by a student without intellectual disabilities). From these entries, 87 initial codes emerged. Similar codes were collapsed into major categories through the axial coding stage of grounded theory. Like their classmates without disabilities, five major categories emerged from written reflections. Moreover, three categories similar to their classmates' categories emerged. The five categories were as follows: (1) mobility/transportation, (2) bonding/social inclusion, (3) learning from experiences of English and Irish adults with intellectual disabilities, (4) personal growth/development, and (5) fun.

### **Results**

On the study abroad trip, all students traveled to common organizations, agencies, universities, and landmarks throughout London and Dublin. Students signaled their individuality through their journals' form and voice, but nonetheless, commonalities emerged in reflections as students

responded to shared events. Conceptually common categories contained distinguishable differences between students with and without disabilities who will be referred to respectively as students with disabilities (SWDs) and “Supports” from this point forward. The title Supports is used because all students without disabilities served as natural supports who implemented strategies to assist their peers with disabilities in meeting situational and environmental demands.

### ***Bonding and social inclusion***

For both groups, the “bonding” theme served largely as recognition of the commonalities that bound individuals. All students shared a common identity. They represented the same university, completed the same class work, and felt inspired by many of the same landmarks from Big Ben to Saint Patrick’s Cathedral.

Supports spoke of the connections in more abstract terms. They described a sense of strengthening cohesion and emotional closeness with their fellow travelers. Students felt united by common values and saw themselves at the forefront of a human rights campaign where they were invested in just treatment and access to opportunity for their peers with intellectual disabilities. A mission united the students and contributed to the deepening of their friendships.

SWDs spoke less of deepening relationships and more about expanding friendships. The focus of bonding and inclusion was not singularly targeted to the group with whom the students traveled. Instead, SWDs spoke of being treated well by strangers. Particular delight was shared when describing the friendships forged with Irish college students with disabilities. Where Supports shared common values, SWDs recognized a common sense of success and gratitude expressed by their Irish counterparts. One student described meeting new Irish friends in this way:

It was fun eating lunch with [Irish university students with intellectual disabilities] and their supports. We had a great time meeting them and talking to them, I had made some new friends there which I miss so much, I think I want to be pen pal buddies and stay in touch with them by Facebook, Twitter, and email. We had a very great group photo and lunch opportunity with them which made me feel comfortable.

Whether a disability was present or not, all participants felt part of something bigger and more connected with those surrounding them.

### ***Personal growth and development***

The experience abroad was often viewed as a series of opportunities for change. Development was seen as the growth that occurred when confronting a challenge. One common challenge often cited by Supports and SWDs was public speaking. All students structured presentations describing their domestic roles as college-age natural supports or as college students with intellectual disabilities for audiences in English organizations or Irish universities. Supports saw this challenge as an opportunity for professional growth, while SWDs described the importance of being validated by their home university and international audiences.

In the same way, Supports were more likely to frame their challenges as an opportunity to develop as professionals and advocates—distinctions they found were often blurred. They focused on challenging behaviors and interactions with SWDs that encouraged the construction and implementation of new support strategies. These strategies helped increase a sense of accessibility and mutual respect. Other journal entries were affirmations of choices to pursue a career and lifestyle that would increase opportunity for individuals with disabilities.

Supports also focused on personal growth they found in pursuing an international experience. This type of growth tended to also be of importance to SWDs. Overtly, SWDs took pride in confronting the challenges of cultural adaptation, which included everything from understanding unfamiliar accents to using foreign currency. While studying domestically, SWDs target a variety of adaptive behavior goals, and abroad they found opportunities to put such lessons to practical application.

As SWDs reflected, they emphasized capabilities like creating solutions to a variety of perceived challenges. SWDs described themselves as critical thinkers using challenges abroad as an opportunity to either learn or demonstrate skills. SWDs problem solved with purchases and travel, meanwhile comparing their opportunities to those of their peers with disabilities in England and Ireland. These reflections yielded an increased appreciation for the opportunities that had been afforded to them. One student noticed:

Our program is inclusive . . . they only get to attend an inclusive class once a week. Half of the class was doing work-studies and the other half was working on an essay for a final project, whereas in our program, we all are set up with a work placement.

Like their classmates, SWDs began thinking like advocates, questioning why many adults with intellectual disabilities do not have more opportunities for participation in inclusive PSE opportunities.

### ***Learning from English and Irish adults with intellectual disabilities***

Three major course objectives were as follows: (a) to discover the living arrangements, (b) employment options, and (c) attitudes toward adults with intellectual disabilities in England and Ireland. Throughout their reflections, all students agreed that the best way to appreciate the experiences of adults with intellectual disabilities was by listening to firsthand accounts of personal narratives. All students felt privileged to have intimate access to firsthand experiences from advocates, employees, and students with intellectual disabilities.

Beyond learning about daily lives, Supports gathered strategies and ideas that could be implemented domestically. When confronted directly with history, successes, and obstacles for individuals with disabilities, SWDs felt invested and sometimes even emotionally involved. As one said:

It was very moving to hear what those people said. When [an Irish college student] showed us his video about his life, it made me cry. What made me cry was he was talking about his experiences in the university and how it made a difference in his life and all around him.

The heterogeneous study abroad group shared three common themes. However, interpretation of Support and Student reflections also yielded two distinct themes for each homogenous group.

### ***Support-specific categories***

**Barrier awareness.** Not all aspects of the study abroad trip proved salient to both sets of students. Supports used journals as an opportunity to share awareness of the barriers preventing complete societal access for individuals with disabilities. Initially, reports of barriers in the physical environment were expounded in several journal entries. Supports noted inaccessible restroom stalls, few curb cuts, and buildings without elevators or lifts. The physical environment was perceived as

a statement of preference for those without mobility challenges. Early in the trip, Supports noted social barriers, including separation and segregation. Notably, Supports felt customs “othered” the group. One student described the situation this way:

We were standing in the “regular” line and one of the people with us had a noticeable speech impediment and he was talking and having a good time like he normally does and all of a sudden one of the customs people comes up to us and tells us that we can move to a different line. Now in my mind I’m thinking they opened up another line and since we were in a big group we got to start the new line. NOPE. She sent us straight to the handicapped line.

Separation was also observed in some higher education environments visited during the trip. One Support said:

I didn’t see where these individuals were going after their time at the school, their lecture time was not the same as regular students, they were basically confined to the same people in the same settings, some didn’t seem happy, they didn’t have much motivation, and I could probably keep on going.

This was described as a stark contrast to the inclusive and individualized program in the United States to which Supports and SWDs alike had grown accustomed. Further, Supports described finances as a means of separation. They reported that many individuals with disabilities, family members, and agency employees cited a lack of government funding as a primary reason that consumers were not more involved in paid work, higher education, or community participation.

**Inclusive learning.** More so than their classmates with disabilities, Supports described the benefits of participating in an inclusive learning experience. For SWDs, academic inclusion paralleled with their domestic college experiences, but for Supports chances to participate in inclusive college courses was a more novel experience. Supports felt they benefited personally when their bond with SWDs was strengthened. A bidirectional exchange of benefit was described. Supports noted the way they assisted SWDs, but they also acknowledged how they benefited by being “able to put on multiple lenses and experience this foreign culture in many ways.” Cognizance of everyone’s need for support and the ways they benefited from inclusion strengthened Supports’ resolve to advocate for inclusion. Different supports said, “Inclusion often helps those of us without a disability more than it does those who have disabilities,” and “people need to get out of their discomfort and jump into the pool that is inclusion.”

### **SWDs specific categories**

Like Supports, SWDs’ journals yielded unique themes. More than their peers, SWDs frequently incorporated transportation experience into daily journals. They also frequently reflected upon their experiences with exhilaration, appreciation, and joy. Both themes are described in greater detail.

**Transportation experiences.** For SWDs, detailing modes of transportation emerged as important element of the study abroad opportunity. Past studies have shown access to transportation increases participation to community activities while reducing perceptions of loneliness and isolation (Abbott and McConkey, 2006). In the current study, SWDs chose to describe their flights between countries, boat rides on the Thames, national train rides outside of London, as well as intracity transit like taxis, buses, and most frequently the London Underground subway system.

Documenting types of transportation served as a statement of competence. SWDs infrequently utilized these modes of transport in their stateside experiences at a rural university. Therefore, the exposure and challenges of riding public transport offered an opportunity for developing adaptive and social skills. One student described these challenges on London's underground metropolitan railway:

[We] took a metro/the great tube. It was so, so crowded on the train station and also slam packed. We did this on Thursday and also rode on a train to different stops and the train station was on a very different time schedule.

Navigating various modes of transport required problem solving and patience. However, all SWDs mentioned navigating transportation in each journal, viewing the opportunities with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

*Fun.* Many experiences on the trip were novel for SWDs. New experiences were viewed as exciting and enjoyable—they were adventures abroad with friends. As in previous research “fun” was described dynamically (Johnson et al., 2012). Sometimes fun derived from exploration and recreation: “Today was so fun because we went everywhere in England and Big Ben and also exploring everywhere in England.” Other times, enjoyment or positive affect derived from a sense of belonging and shedding common labels such as person with a disability, student, or American. As one SWD said, “in ways it [being in London] is very cool. I feel like I can blend in very well.” Enjoyment was also achieved by hanging out with friends, confronting daily demands of travel and class (“My day made me very tired and was very long, but I had a great, super, awesome time.”) and discovering new identities (“I am a city guy.”). Causes aside, expressions of joy, gratitude, and excitement were commonly expressed in SWD’s journals.

## **Discussion**

For PSE programs, facilitating parallel university experiences for students with and without intellectual disabilities, inclusive study abroad options are becoming increasingly important. In this study, students, through their daily journals, shared anecdotes abroad that later formed seven themes detailing the most salient aspects of inclusive international study. However, the dearth of past research detailing student reflections during inclusive international study prevents direct comparison to previous work. Broader study abroad literature that included international travel for adults without disabilities, students with a range physical, learning, or psychological disabilities, or travel for adults with intellectual disabilities, nevertheless, was found to be useful for further examining some themes generated in this study.

Supports described the multiple ways they developed while studying abroad with peers with intellectual disabilities. Through the experiences, Supports developed personally and professionally, learned more about the barriers people with various disabilities face daily, and strengthened friendships with their peers with intellectual disabilities. These students without disabilities explained their desire to universally advance ethos of inclusion. Conversely, another inclusive study abroad course in Switzerland found that students without disabilities depicted their inclusive class as burdensome (Twill and Guzzo, 2012). These students reported being primarily compelled by guilt into assisting classmates with disabilities. However, similar to Supports’ journal entries,

some students without disabilities from the Swiss study abroad group reported becoming more aware and compassionate through assisting peers with physical or psychological disabilities.

Adults with intellectual disabilities, given opportunities for international holiday travel without family caregivers, reported themes similar to SWDs in this study. Namely, adults with intellectual disabilities on holiday reported being satisfied with the experience because it was fun (McConkey and McCullough, 2006). Fun was a dynamic concept, often resulting in positive affect, which also reported by respondents in this study. Happiness, measured through overall life satisfaction, has also been reported to peak in adults without disabilities during travel (Sirgy et al., 2011).

Sharing time with friends also contributed to travel satisfaction for adults with intellectual disabilities (McConkey and McCullough, 2006). In this study, students with and without intellectual disabilities found that developing friendships with fellow travelers and international counterparts was a critical component of study abroad. These friendships emerged in inclusive contexts, and it was through discussions of friendship that SWDs commented on the importance of inclusive learning. Unlike Supports, SWDs did not use abstract terminology like “inclusive learning” to express the value they placed on intellectually diverse class contexts.

Lastly, SWDs consistently described enjoyable activities, like facing the challenges of urban public transport and exploring famous landmarks, as an important aspect of their times abroad. Enjoyable activities during travel also emerged as a major theme described by other adults with intellectual disabilities during holiday travel (McConkey and McCullough, 2006).

Because themes derived in this study were not exhaustive and study abroad literature that includes students with intellectual disability is limited, we were restricted in our ability to match our findings with extant reports. Nonetheless, students described the most salient aspects of their inclusive study abroad experiences through daily journals, and from those student-generated themes, we took away three lessons that we deem important to consider when creating future study abroad opportunities: (1) inclusion matters; (2) flexible instruction matters; (3) study abroad transcends studying.

### ***Inclusion matters***

Supports and SWDs alike expressed the benefits of inclusive study. These sentiments are not entirely novel. May (2012) found that compared to their peers in separate classes, college students who took classes with classmates with intellectual disabilities were more open to diversity. Some college students without intellectual disabilities believe there are benefits for including students with intellectual disabilities on the college campus (Griffin et al., 2012), while others report that including students with intellectual disabilities in the classroom is beneficial for classmates without intellectual disabilities (Westling et al., 2013). However, through their reflections, students without disabilities in the current study went further, and they stated their experience studying abroad was enhanced by the inclusion of peers with intellectual disabilities.

On a personal level, Supports described an experience enriched by SWDs’ palpable excitement for daily challenges and exploration (inclusive learning). They were also more aware of a foundational interdependence that undergirds society. By deconstructing the ways they met peers’ support needs, Supports reported being more cognizant of situations where they relied on assistance from others whether to navigate an unfamiliar metropolis or add money to a subway pass. Also as a result of studying with peers with disabilities, Supports viewed themselves as more aware of physical, social, and political barriers to full inclusion for citizens with diverse abilities (barrier awareness). In essence, the qualitative interpretation of Support journals described more than the

benefit of inclusion, it captured *how* Supports believed they benefited from studying abroad inclusively.

As for SWDs, they described traveling and learning with same-age peers in ways similar to what has been described by travelers with mobility disabilities (Yau et al., 2004) and other college students with intellectual disabilities (Jones and Goble, 2012). They found that Supports provided practical assistance but also provided the companionship that made exploring new terrain, both academic and geographic, more enjoyable (bonding and social inclusion and fun). All students described inclusion like they described their international travel—as an adventure that increases the competence for those who choose to engage.

### ***Flexible instruction matters***

Prior to departure and during the excursion, students read publications detailing public services and daily experiences of adults with intellectual disabilities in England and Ireland. At organizations and agencies, students listened to experts, researchers, and agents. However, these sources of information were rarely mentioned in reflections, and when they were, it was to state points contrary to findings. All learners, however, cited the quintessential pathway to understanding services and experiences of adults with intellectual disabilities was by interacting directly with them (learning from English and Irish adults with intellectual disabilities). Policy was best understood as self-advocates-described agendas for increasing public awareness of failing services. The spectrum of Ireland's PSE opportunities was best shared through conversation, meals, testimony, and documentary film with college students with intellectual disabilities. The class was truly comparative as American and Irish students with intellectual disabilities swapped stories and natural supports discussed strategies. Furthermore, both groups felt their values of inclusion materialize through opportunities to meet English and Irish citizens with intellectual disabilities. Each instructional method was valuable, but only one built community while meeting course objectives. In 2009, Soneson and Cordano listed a variety of recommendations for implementing more universally designed international study opportunities that would allow access for learners with varying abilities. From student responses, flexible instructional and learning practices demonstrated essential elements of consideration with inclusive study abroad.

### ***Transcending study***

“Study abroad” was clearly an experience that transcended academics. The aspects which came to define students’ travel extended beyond the class that facilitated the journey. Social cohesion was facilitated by instructors in some cases, but mostly it grew organically. Journals were often written in a collective voice (“we”) or described interactions between people. In reference to the heterogeneous group, an emergent psychological sense of community was described. A sense of belonging, an ability to influence and be influenced by the group, reaping benefits from group participation, and deepening emotional closeness are all elements described in reflections (bonding and social inclusion). What is more, those perceptions align with the commonly agreed upon subcomponents of a psychological sense of community: membership, mutual influence, needs attainment, and emotional connection (McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Perkins et al., 1990). By building friendships and feeling supported by travel partners, all students acquired a protective buffer from the harmful stressors of international travel.

Although student cohesion can be promoted through group-building activities, it cannot be controlled by instructors. However, by adapting class agendas, instructors can allocate more

opportunities for independent travel where students directly confront the unknown and learn from their challenges. All students described the benefits of adequate academic, professional, and personal challenges. Challenges helped students use their strengths and believe in their abilities, whether addressing international audiences or navigating new cities (personal growth and development and transportation experiences). Students described opportunities for freedom and moderated risk as contributing to their professional and personal development. Leaders of international study have the choice to provide enough guidance to assure students avoid frustration and enough challenge to assure that students have an opportunity to grow, much the same balance noted by Supports who met SWDs' support needs.

### ***Future research***

As more universities support educational opportunities for intellectually diverse students and more opportunities emerge for inclusive international travel, researchers should be prepared to investigate the impact of such experiences. The current research offered a single path for contextualizing the impact of inclusive study abroad. The methods used are not prescriptive, leaving future opportunity to investigate the same phenomena with different tools. Also that which was deemed salient by one group of students may not emerge as important for another. As such, present themes can be revisited with future inclusive groups. This research shared the most important elements of a study abroad opportunity as reported by students with and without intellectual disabilities. However, as structured, the research did not monitor whether student attitudes, beliefs, skills, and behaviors changed as a result of inclusive study.

Researchers also face the task of monitoring the impact of these experiences across student areas of study. The group in the present study was primarily comprised of education and communication sciences students. What is more, these students had previous contact with their classmates with disability. The students entered their journey with exposure and experiences with inclusion. Whether the benefits of inclusive travel documented by the students in this study holds evident for more academically and experientially diverse college students will need to be investigated.

Only three students with intellectual disabilities participated in the current research. There is considerable opportunity to monitor changes in adaptive, social, and academic skills as well as changes in attitudes and perceptions. As we continue to identify barriers to independent, international travel, the opportunity emerges to create intervention and training that prepares adults with intellectual disabilities to experience the world as they desire.

### ***Implications***

Existing PSE programs can facilitate inclusive study abroad courses by addressing logistical and support needs. To do this PSE, staff should serve as liaisons to international study offices located on their respective campuses. They will need to collaborate with agenda construction and help recruit and train natural supports within study abroad groups. Collaboration with instructors will be essential. In some cases, PSE programs can form partnerships with emerging international PSE programs to find the maximally supportive exchange environments (Kelley et al., 2016).

PSE staff comprise only one element of a larger community that are necessary for inclusive study abroad opportunities. Not long ago, students with intellectual disabilities were unable to participate in higher education opportunities. But now students with intellectual disabilities should look beyond attending college to elements of the college experience that will help them to become

as well rounded and marketable as possible. Students can then start creating person-centered goals for international travel and studying abroad. With goals in place, action items can be constructed to lead to goal satisfaction.

For students with intellectual disabilities to study abroad, families must be supportive. Allowing for dignity of risk to outweigh fears is required for all family members that encourage study abroad opportunities. In universities where federal grants and financial aid are unavailable to students with intellectual disabilities, families will also need to provide financial support. Many additional players will need to make study abroad experiences more accessible, including classmates, faculty, administration, international study offices, and partner universities. All students in the group studied clearly stated the ways in which inclusion enhanced the study abroad experience, and all the individuals who make study abroad possible also have an opportunity to create university sanctioned, inclusive, international experiences.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (P407A100004).

### **References**

Abbott S and McConkey R (2006) The barriers to social inclusion as perceived by people with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 10(3): 275–287.

Charmaz K (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Davies DK, Stock SE, Holloway S, et al. (2010) Evaluating a GPS-based transportation device to support independent bus travel by people with intellectual disability. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 48(6): 454–463.

Dykens E, Schwenk K, Maxwell, et al. (2006) The sentence completion and three wishes task: windows into the inner lives of people with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 51(8): 588–597.

Glaser B and Strauss A (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.

Griffin MM, Summer AH, McMillan ED, et al. (2012) Attitudes toward including students with intellectual disabilities at college. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disability* 9(4): 234–239.

Groce M (1996) A model of a travel training program: The New York City Board of Education travel training program. *NICHY: Transition Summary* 9: 10–13.

Hurst A (1998) Students with disabilities and opportunities to study abroad. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 2(2): 117–129.

Institute of International Education (IIE) (2014) Students with disabilities, 2006/07-2012/13.” *Open Doors report on international educational exchange*. Available at: <http://www.iie.org/opendoors> (accessed 20 March 2015).

Johnson H, Douglas J, Bigby C, et al. (2012) Social interaction with adults with severe intellectual disability: having fun and hanging out. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 25: 329–341.

Jones MM and Goble Z (2012) Creating effective mentoring partnerships for students with intellectual disabilities on campus. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disability* 9: 270–278.

Katz E (2007) Students with disabilities studying abroad. *International Educator* 16: 52–57.

Kelley KR, Prohn SM, and Westling DL (2016) Inclusive study abroad course for college students with and without intellectual disability. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 21(1): 91–101.

Kishore TM and Nagar RK (2008) Mountaineering expedition by persons with intellectual disability: impact on behavior and temperament. *Journal of Intellectual Disability* 12(13): 183–189.

Mapp SC (2012) Effect of short-term study abroad programs on students cultural adaptability. *Journal of Social Work Education* 48(4): 727–737.

May C (2012) An investigation of attitude change in inclusive college classes including young adults with an intellectual disability. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disability* 9(4): 240–246.

McConkey R and McCullough J (2006) Holiday breaks for adults with intellectual disabilities living with older carers. *Journal of Social Work* 6(1): 65–79.

McMillan D and Chavis D (1986) Sense of community: a definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology* 14: 6–23.

Perkins DD, Florin P, Rich RC, et al. (1990) Participation and the social and physical environment of residential blocks: crime and community context. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 18(1): 83–115.

Salisbury MH, An BP, and Pascarella ET (2013) The effect of study abroad on intercultural competence among undergraduate college students. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 50(1): 1–20.

Sirgy MJ, Kruger PS, Lee DJ, et al. (2011) How does a travel trip affect tourists life satisfaction? *Journal of Travel Research* 50(3): 261–275.

Snyder TD and Dillow SA (2013) Digest of Education Statistics 2012 (NCES 2014-015). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

Soneson HM and Cordano RJ (2009) Universal design and study abroad: (Re-)designing programs for effectiveness and access. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 18: 269–288.

Strauss AL (1987) *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tarrant MA, Rubin DL, and Stoner L (2014) The added value of study abroad: fostering a global citizenry. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 18(2): 141–161.

Think College (2015) College options for people with intellectual disabilities. Available at: <http://www.thinkcollege.net/> (accessed 15 March 2015).

Twill SE and Guzzo GR (2012) Lessons learned from a disabilities accessible study abroad trip. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 25(1): 81–86.

Westling DL, Kelley KR, Cain B, et al. (2013) College students attitudes about an inclusive postsecondary education program for individuals with an intellectual disability. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* 48(3): 306–319.

Yau MK, McKercher B, and Packer TL (2004) Traveling with a disability: more than an access issue. *Annals of Tourism Research* 51(4): 946–960.